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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: JORDAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: ISLAMIST BOYCOTT:
FLAME-OUT OR MANEUVER?

REF: A. AMMAN 3162
[1](#)B. AMMAN 3005

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Islamic Action Front,s (IAF) withdrawal from July 31 municipal elections is being read as a pre-meditated step to undermine the legitimacy of the polling, employed after a last-minute realization that GOJ boosting of nationalist candidates was succeeding beyond IAF expectations. While the Front has defended its stance based on claimed election-day irregularities that corrupted the democratic exercise, the Palace senses that the Front has over-reached, particularly with accusations it has made against the Jordanian Armed Forces. End Summary.

IAF Withdraws on Election Day

[1](#)2. (C) Up until the last days before the election the IAF had been threatening a possible boycott to signal its unhappiness with GOJ efforts to contain it (ref A). On July 30 the Muslim Brotherhood,s website posted the text of a formal message from the Brotherhood,s controller general Salim al-Falahat to Prime Minister Bakhit complaining of reports that soldiers were not being given leave to vote in their local districts, implying that they were being kept on duty for the purposes of voting en masse and under instruction. The same website also posted statements from a press conference by IAF Secretary General Zaki Bani Irsheid in which he predicted "widespread rigging" based on numerous instances of voter registration violations (including, according to Irsheid, individuals being registered in more than one voting district).

[1](#)3. (C) While voting on the 31st was proceeding smoothly in those locations where Embassy teams were visiting polling centers (in the municipalities of Amman, Irbid, Karak, Madaba, Salt, and Zarqa), at roughly mid-day the media began to report that the IAF was withdrawing from the election. These reports arrived simultaneously with reports of violence in Madaba, allegedly precipitated by the arrival of busloads of citizens voting en masse. In some reporting these out-of-district voters were illiterate soldiers casting their ballots under procedures that allow oral voting.

[1](#)4. (C) The import of the IAF,s statement - even after its leadership confirmed the decision as the afternoon wore on - was not clear. Voting continued countrywide with no changes to the candidate lists. Many of our Ministry of Municipal Affairs (MoMA) contacts asserted that a withdrawal on election day had no meaning. By evening, the IAF had articulated the reasons for its withdrawal, accusing the government of facilitating repeat voting by soldiers under government instruction (full text of statement below). The GOJ began to fire back shortly thereafter, with government spokesman Nasser Joudah declaring the withdrawal an illegal political maneuver and Prime Minister Bakhit also publicly

dismissing the relevance of the withdrawal. (Note: Embassy teams, which visited over 40 polling stations in locations across the country, did not witness any irregularities such as those described by the IAF. End note.)

Transparent, if Tilted, Playing Field, So Why the Withdrawal?

15. (C) For months the GOJ has been striving, with varying degrees of subtlety, to head off Islamist victories in these local elections. Government interpretation of the elections law as allowing voters to write in the name of only one municipal council candidate was expected to shift votes to tribal, rather than party, affiliations. Steady editorial attacks against the IAF for having close ties to Iran and for supporting Hamas, take-over in Gaza were intended to soften the political ground. Finally, there were GOJ behind-the-scenes efforts to encourage consolidation and coalition-building among pro-government candidates (to avoid splitting the pro-government vote and allowing IAF victories beyond the party's natural level of support; ref A).

16. (C) The IAF counter-strategy focused on seeking every opportunity to embarrass the government (for its relations with Israel, its pro-U.S. policy, and its failure to alleviate economic hardships), energizing its base, and periodically threatening to boycott if it was not satisfied with the arrangements (ref B).

17. (C) The above dynamic is widely understood and generally seen as the "rules of the game" in Jordanian electoral politics. Thus the IAF's last-minute withdrawal is being characterized by the government as a premeditated act intended to delegitimize the elections and strengthen the Front's hand in negotiating over terms of parliamentary

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elections expected for November. The IAF's decision to pull the plug, then, was made when the Front recognized the success of government efforts to target IAF candidates for defeat.

Consequences Unclear

18. (SBU) The practical consequences of the withdrawal are unclear. The IAF lost all of the big mayoral races, including in its strongholds of Zarqa and Irbid (septel), by significant margins. The Front has not pronounced on whether victorious IAF municipal council members will take their seats, but the government has made it clear that it considers the elections legitimate and final. Public opinion is split as well. Independent opposition Al-Arab Al-Yawm carried a column decrying the "failure" of the elections due to improper actions taken against Islamist candidates, but center-left, influential, and pro-Palestinian Al-Dustour editorialized that the elections were a "great success" and criticized those "trying to cast doubt on our sound (national) march".

Comment

19. (C) The IAF is on delicate ground in accusing the military of complicity in election fraud. Seen as a pillar of the nation and as being 'of the people,' the Jordan Armed Forces are not an easy target, and the government is on solid popular ground by defending, as it has done, the constitutional right of Jordanian soldiers to vote in the local elections. As predicted, both sides are spinning furiously: the GOJ to paint the IAF as sore losers seeking to embarrass the government for their own political purposes, and the IAF to undermine the validity of elections in which they went down to a significant defeat (without, we note, attempting to seek redress through the proper formal channels, e.g. challenging voter lists in advance of the polling).

¶10. (U) Begin text of IAF statement.

Since the early hours this morning we have been following with great concern the incidents that accompanied the municipal elections in the various areas of Jordan. Yet what we warned against right from the very beginning of the elections process took place. Despite documenting these violations and breaches, which are in the thousands, and officially reporting them, the government did not stop these violations and breaches. Election committees, many citizens, and our candidates noticed the following violations since this morning:

- ¶1. Transporting members of the military and security institutions in hundreds of buses from their camps to where they will vote for certain candidates using already filled-in and repeated ballot papers, and then moving them to other polling centers to vote for another time
- ¶2. Repeated and intensive voting for specific candidates
- ¶3. opening fire in the area of southern Amman and causing one citizen to be injured
- ¶4. Quarrels, riots, and destroying some ballot boxes
- ¶5. Expelling and arresting some of our representatives from the polling stations
- ¶6. Beating some journalists and seizing their cameras
- ¶7. The absence of the government and its ministers; it is impossible to contact them despite repeated attempts to do so.

As a result of these and other violations, we hold the government fully responsible for what happened and what is happening. We stress the need and importance to have a clean electoral process although we denounce and object to all violations, and to hold those who committed them accountable.

We continue to receive reports on several major violations at different polling centers across the governorates and we are discussing on a high level the right stance to have in order to serve the overall national interest.

Hence the front announces its boycott of the municipal elections.

End of text.
Hale